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Political Dialogues.
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Number I.

64
ON THE GENERAL

PRINCIPLES OF GOVERNMENT.

LONDON,

PRINTED FOR J. JOHNSON, ST. PAUL'S CHURCH YARD, LONDON,

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[Price Three-pence.]



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Political Dialogues.

A. **TWENTY-TWO** years ago, you and I had a conversation on *the state of Liberty in Great Britain and the Colonies**. At that time you were not a little alarmed at several recent encroachments of the power of the crown, and especially at the measures which were then taking with our American colonies. The sense of the nation, expressed in remonstrances, and other ways, contributed not a little to put a stop to the particular encroachments then complained of on liberty at home; but those on the liberties of America proceeded till they produced an open rupture with our colonies, and ended in their entire separation from us. This is an event which, though we then dreaded, we now (excepting the bloodshed and expence attending it) rejoice in, as having proved happy for both countries; having effectually secured the liberties of America, and bearing a favourable aspect upon our own. Since that time other great events of a public nature have taken place, and the minds of all thinking men, in this country and throughout all Europe, are big with expectation of others of the same nature, still more

* This refers to a small tract with this title, published in 1769.

extensive. I cannot help, therefore, wishing to have some conversation with you on the subject.

B. The great events to which you allude have not failed to excite my attention, as well as that of thousands of others, since they are likely to have the most important and extensive consequences. In America and France (to say nothing of Poland) we have examples of two entirely new constitutions of government, that deserve particular notice, as differing from any that the world has seen before; and I own that my reflections upon them have given me new lights on the subject of government, and such as I am very willing to lay before you, that we may consider the particulars dispassionately, and at leisure.

A. The two most striking features in the new government of France, are the abolition of all *titles of nobility*, and the assumption of the whole power of the state by the *National Assembly*, without allowing an effectual negative to any other body of men, or to the King; whereas we in this country are so used to the idea of the balance of *three powers*, that we are apt to think no other system can be so good.

B. This is a very general opinion, and was my own. But perhaps we have not sufficiently considered either the late situation of France, the origin and use of nobility, or the proper nature and use of checks upon public resolutions.

The affairs of France were evidently come to a great crisis, in consequence of their enormous public debts, and the excessive power of the

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the crown, which are in a great measure *cause* and *effect* to each other. The king, the nobility, and the clergy, were evidently all interested in perpetuating the abuses; and consequently to have allowed an absolute negative to any one of them would have defeated every project of effectual reform. It was therefore wise in the leaders of the people, who are *the many*, to remove this certain obstruction from *the few*, to measures calculated for the general advantage. Without this previous step, nothing of consequence could have been done.

A. It always appeared to me that France was the last country in Europe in which we could expect any such revolution as hath lately taken place in it; the court having been long in possession of all the power of the nation, and the great body of the people having no voice at all in any public measures.

B. In general, it is only on such great emergencies as these that the sense and power of the people can make themselves felt; and even this great occasion would have passed over without any such happy consequence, if the minds of the people had not been previously enlightened on the subject of government, so that they could go at once to the proper source of their abuses. Without this, the late embarrassment in the finances of France would only have terminated in a national bankruptcy, and would not have produced any change in the form of its government.

Notwithstanding the great force of every nation consists in the mass of the common people

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who

who cannot receive any material favours from the executive powers of the state; and therefore cannot be much influenced by them, yet they are in general so wholly occupied in their own affairs, that they are incapable of attending to any thing else, and therefore nothing but extreme oppression will rouse them to action; and when they are roused their proceedings are generally irregular and ineffectual, both from their not knowing the true sources of their grievances, and from their inability to act in concert. Well knowing this their situation, when they have no person in whom they can put intire confidence, they often bear the extreme of oppression without looking to any remedy at all, while their governors enjoy all the valuable effects of their industry. In this country, where we do not complain of oppression, because it is partial, an enormous proportion, it is thought two-thirds, of the fruit of its industry is at the absolute disposal of government, and this was very much the case with France.

A. This being a most unnatural state of society, its expenditure bearing a most unreasonable proportion to its resources, it is certainly of importance to inquire into the causes of it, in order to discover in what manner so great an evil may be guarded against in a new government or remedied in an old one.

B. Since this profusion of the public money arose from other persons than those whose industry acquired it having the disposal of it, it would certainly have been prevented if this latter

class

class of citizens, viz. the industrious, by whose labour the wealth was procured, either had the management of public business, or a sufficient controul over those who do conduct it; and it seems impossible in the nature of things that there should be any other remedy. So long as one set of men provide the money, and another set have the disposal of it, there will be no œconomy. The great difficulty, however, is how to bring this about, or how to construct a government so that the labouring and industrious part of the community shall have an effectual check upon their *governors*, or, to call things by their proper names, their *servants*. And since we must, in all these cases, consider mankind as governed by interest, the government must be constructed in such a manner, as that no person shall be interested to bring things into this state, or that if they be, it shall not be in their power to do it.

A. Such a construction of a government will, I fear, be very difficult.

B. As great things are best understood by comparison with small ones of the same nature, let us consider by what means it is that the interest of a parish, or single township, is best consulted. How it is that no more money is raised than is really wanted for any public purpose, and how is any mismanagement in the expenditure prevented?

1. In the first place care is taken that whenever money is to be raised, the occasion of

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the

the demand is explained to those who are to advance it, so that, if they will give any attention to the subject, they may clearly understand it.

2. A majority at least of those who are to advance the money have a power of granting or withholding it at pleasure, and when any unforeseen abuse takes place, they can immediately interpose, and check it.

3. They themselves either appoint the officers who superintend the collection and expenditure of the public money, and pay them for their trouble, or they discharge those offices in their turns, so that they all alike share the expence and the burden.

4. If any person be indemnified for his trouble by a *salary*, it is always proportioned to the time and the labour which he gives to the public, and it is no greater than is sufficient to get the business well done, so that competition for offices can never be great. If this be the case, it is a proof that the salary is exorbitant, and ought to be retrenched.

5. No office is held a longer time than the occasion requires, and the greater is the *power* that it gives a man, the shorter is the *time* that he is allowed to hold it; and only offices of mere labour or small salary, for which there is little competition, are continued long in the same hands.

6. Upon no consideration is it ever in the power of any persons to check the proceedings which

which are determined upon by a majority; so that in one district, or township, there is ultimately but *one will*. Otherwise all public business might be at a stand.

A. If these plain maxims be observed, it seems, indeed, impossible that the affairs of any parish, or township, should be ill conducted, and especially that the public money should be lavished. But how can these maxims of government be extended to a large kingdom?

B. By the method of *representation* every difficulty arising from the extent of territory and the number of people, united under any government, is easily obviated.

Though the individuals who compose a whole nation, cannot meet, and do their own business, as in a single parish, or township; and but few of them will have leisure to attend to the interest of the whole, any person can make choice of another to act for him: and if his choice be limited to persons living in his neighbourhood, he cannot be much mistaken in their general character, either for ability or integrity. Let one of these delegates, therefore, be chosen for every district containing ten or twenty thousand inhabitants. These, having a more extensive knowledge of the country, will be able to select the fittest persons to act for them in a much larger district; and in this manner, be the country ever so extensive, a proper number, suppose a thousand persons, the fittest to conduct public business of all kinds, may be selected, and constitute

a *national assembly*, similar to that of France at present.

Such a national assembly as this might be chosen even annually, if it was thought proper, without much inconvenience or expence, none at all to the candidates, and very little to the community, provided the original districts were small. In this case the votes of the largest country might be collected without any tumult, in a single day. A national assembly thus chosen would consist of the most respectable members of the society: and as they would not derive any pecuniary advantage from serving their country, their proceedings might be conducted without tumult, especially if all votes were given by ballot.

It is needless to say that a national assembly thus constituted, and frequently changed, could not have any other object in their consultations than the interest of the whole community; and though the country should contain within itself a thousand different interests, and every member of the assembly should have a view to some separate interest, they would of course so ballance one another, that the result would be a measure favouring *the greater number*, which ought to be the object of every government. If any of their measures should eventually prove to be injurious, it would soon be rectified. In such a state even experiments might be made with safety, because it would not be the interest of the majority to aggravate, or perpetuate, any abuse.

A. What do you take to be the chief sources of abuse in all governments?

B. The great sources of abuse in all states have been the excessive emoluments of office, and the continuance of them in the same persons or families. This necessarily gives them an interest separate from that of the society at large and an interest in increasing abuses in their own favour. But when the salaries of office are small, or nothing, (and in all cases the more *honourable* they are, the less occasion there is to make them *lucrative*) and when they are held only for a short term, there can be no temptation whatever to create, or increase, an abuse. For every man will then govern as he would wish to be governed, when it comes to be his turn, as, in a government so constructed, it soon must be.

This rule will operate to the extinction of all *hereditary privileges*; as they necessarily give those who are in possession of them a separate interest, which they will be studious to augment. Besides, all privileges peculiar to a few necessarily imply a degradation of the rest of the community, and it is evidently the interest of the whole that all privileges should be open to virtue and ability, directed to the public good. But if stations of honour and advantage be already pre-occupied, the door is shut against all new claimants.

A. There is something very fascinating in the idea of hereditary honours, and powers, though I am well aware that a country may suffer by them.

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B. One

B. One evident consequence of all hereditary honours, like those of sovereign princes, is the great expence at which it is thought necessary they should be maintained, which occasions a needless and pernicious profusion of public money; as if the honour of a nation was concerned in *this*, rather than in the construction of public works, of substantial use to posterity. But the greatest danger arises from hereditary power of all kinds almost necessarily increasing, especially if it fall into the hands of a succession of able men; and even if princes be themselves weak, it is the interest of abler men to augment their power, in order that they may avail themselves of it.

A. But we generally give a decided preference to *hereditary* before *elective* monarchy.

B. The only danger that can arise to a state from making any station of honour, or power, *elective* has arisen from the greatness of the power, and its long duration, being at least for life. Make the prize less worth contending for, and there will be fewer competitors, and less inconvenience from the competition.

The only recommendation of hereditary succession to *kingly* power is the greatness of it, in consequence of which it is of importance that the right to its possession should be universally acknowledged; competition for such power as *this* being the occasion of civil wars, the greatest evil that can befall a country.

That hereditary honours and powers are not *necessary* to government, is evident from the history

history of Eastern nations, in which, the reigning family only excepted, they are unknown; and if by the mode of representation the prince himself could be appointed by the people, as all other officers are appointed by him, the system would, in this respect, be uniform and complete.

A. But when persons continue in office only a short time, they retire when they have acquired experience proper to conduct themselves in them. Is it not therefore better to have magistrates for life?

B. When the chief magistrate holds his office for life, as in this country, the business of it is not really done by *him*, but by his ministers, who are frequently changed. And would it not be better to have a regular provision for changing them, than that it should be done at the caprice of any individual, whose choice of ministers may not be directed by any view to the public good.

Besides, the business of states is not so difficult, but that persons who give proper attention to it may easily prepare themselves for the conduct of it. We change our house of commons every seven years (and ought to do it in much less time) without any inconvenience at all. The states of North America have seen no reason to apprehend any thing from changing their assemblies every year, their senate every two years, and their chief magistrate himself every four years. The Romans, while their affairs were in the most flourishing state, changed both their consuls
at

at home, and their commanders abroad every year; and their senate also, might have been changed with as little inconvenience. Hereditary honours in Europe are no older than the feudal system; the titles of nobility being original names of offices, which together with estates in land descended to the heir.

A. If hereditary honours and offices arose from the feudal system, it may well be expected that they will be endangered, from the same causes which have been fatal to other parts of the same system.

B. The rights both of hereditary monarchs, and of an hereditary nobility, which grew up with the feudal system, must finally fall with other parts of the same system, before that prevailing spirit of *industry* and *commerce*, to which it was ever hostile, and before that diffusion of *knowledge* on the subject of government, as well as on every other subject of human enquiry, which has burst out in the last half century. This knowledge has gradually undermined that *opinion*, on which all hereditary privileges were built. Every thing in society will now be brought to the plain test of *use* and *expedience*; and if exclusive privileges of any kind appear to be of no use but to the possessors of them; and if these possessors, who of course are *few*, be gainers in exact proportion to the loss and degradation of the rest of the community, who are *the many*, these many (who will soon find that they have the power, and that those distinctions so degrading to themselves depend

depend upon their pleasure) will level them all, and it will soon be found that the whole community, and even those who seem to be the greatest losers, will in reality be gainers by the change.

A. Will not the nobility be great sufferers from the loss of their privileges?

B. If we consider the education of men of rank, and the fate that almost certainly awaits them, from their exclusion from those employments (those spheres of virtuous activity) which are open to other men, and the consequent debasement of their characters, with the deprivation of almost all real enjoyment, and even the utter extinction to which all great families rapidly tend, no wise man would wish to make his posterity noble, however ambitious he might be to acquire honours for himself.

Men of rank and great fortune, and especially princes, are almost necessarily ill educated, I mean in its most important sense, as it respects *the mind*. The very apparatus for their careful instruction tends to defeat the purpose of it. It cannot be concealed from them, that several persons, selected for their ability and worth, are devoted to their use; and the impression which this consideration alone will make on their minds can hardly fail to do them more harm than all the instructions they receive will do them good; even admitting what will seldom be the case, that the tutor should assume the proper authority of his character, and forget that he may hereafter
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receive favours from his pupil, and not consult his amusement more than his instruction.

To find a sphere of vigorous exertion which shall interest a man sufficiently to make him happy in his pursuits, is barely possible in the case of mere independent *fortune*, even without hereditary *honours*. Young men possessed of the means of indulgence, will seldom attend to any thing else; and without far better principles, and better dispositions, than men of fortune are likely to acquire, we well know of what *kind* that indulgence will be, and how little it will add to their own happiness, or that of others. The man who makes a sensible use of riches which he has not acquired, must be something almost above humanity; and therefore it is not to be expected in the ordinary course of things; and when hereditary titles, and other distinctions, are added to hereditary wealth, the danger must be greatly increased.

There is no man, even though his mind should have acquired strength by personal exertion, who is not more or less hurt by the constant adulation and servility of those who are about him. We see this in the case of such a man as the late Dr. S. Johnson, who rose into public notice by his genius, and by exertions which must at times have been laborious and irksome; and yet the flattery that he met with made him extremely conceited and insolent, so that, had it not been checked by his miserable superstition, and a constant fear of death, he would have been as
unapproachable

unapproachable as an eastern monarch. Also, the court that was paid to him on account of such attainments in knowledge as he had made, led him to neglect and despise others of infinitely more value; so that though he might be called a giant in the Belles Lettres, he was hardly a child in philosophy, morals, theology, or the theory of government; that is, though he was great in little things, he was contemptibly little in great ones. His great powers were exhausted on the subjects of language and taste; and his acquaintance with human nature, which appears to so much advantage in his Rambler, was not greater than that of many other persons, though his wonderful power of language makes it seem to be so.

If distinction and applause could have so unfavourable an effect on a mind like that of Dr. Johnson, whose natural powers were probably equal to those of almost any man whatever; if the situation to which his genius and exertions advanced him could so effectually put a stop to all farther improvement, what can we expect of men who find themselves in the possession of all they can wish as soon as they come of age? What motive can they have to exert themselves at all? The world of *action* they conceive to be shut to them, while that of *enjoyment*, which to them is infinitely more attractive, is open. Can we expect in them the temper of Hercules? Will they prefer the arduous steep of virtue, to the soft vale of pleasure? We find that they do not.

not. And too often their minds, and bodies also, are utterly ruined before they discover their mistake.

Every history in the world shows the degradation of royal families, from those of Assyria and China, to those of Europe, and noble families necessarily suffer from the same cause. The only difference in their favour is that they find more equals than kings can do. But never will men appear to proper advantage, never will they be in a situation in which they will have sufficient motives to exert themselves, in order to acquire useful and laudable qualities, and in which all improper propensities will be repressed, but in a state of perfect equality; when every advantage will be accessible to every man alike, and where no man can expect any preference except from superior virtue or superior ability, employed for the public good.

Such sentiments as these are evidently now prevailing in Europe, and the late revolutions in America and France, together with that in Poland, cannot fail greatly to accelerate their growth. If the affairs of these countries go on well a few years longer, and of this but little doubt can be entertained, the extinction of all hereditary nobility, if not of hereditary monarchy, cannot be far distant. Nay, if hereditary distinctions be not voluntarily abandoned, they will come to be considered as even reproachful. In France an *aristocrate* is already a term of contempt.

A. But

A. But the greatest objection to the new constitution of France is not so much from the abolition of all hereditary titles and privileges, as from the whole business of the state being done in one assembly.

B. The only good reason for giving negatives to different bodies of men has been from the danger of *hasty resolutions*, and such as favour particular classes of persons only. But to make this government by checks complete, the people should be divided into as many classes as they really consist of, viz. husbandmen, manufacturers, traders, lawyers, physicians, clergy, &c. and each different interest should have its negative on the proceedings of the rest: but the absurdity of this system is too obvious to be argued. On the contrary, it is certainly true political wisdom to make as few distinctions as possible, and to blend every interest, by admitting all persons promiscuously into the seat of government: because they will then have exactly that degree of influence which their importance to the state requires, and will therefore have it in their power to check any resolution affecting themselves in particular, as much as it ought to be checked, and no more. And in order to prevent any *hasty resolutions*, times may be fixed for reconsidering every measure, and opportunity given for hearing every thing that can be urged against them, which is all that can be wanted in order to take the best.

There does not therefore, seem to be any necessity for different powers in the same state,
each

each having an absolute negative on the proceedings of the other, in order to secure the most deliberate discussion of every public measure. If the majority of any people understand their own interest, there can be no good reason why they should not have the power of promoting it, and that with as little obstruction and delay as possible. If the obstruction and delay arise from orders of men who have interests opposite to that of the majority of the people, such orders ought not to exist, but should be exterminated as a nuisance, necessarily operating to the diminution of public happiness.

In every state, as in every single person, there ought to be but *one will*, and no important business should be prevented from proceeding by any opposite will. If there be *two wills*, and they can effectually counteract each other, it is no longer *one state*, and one government, but *two states*, and two governments, which though they may agree to act in concert, may likewise act separately: and such was in fact the origin of our mixed government by the king, the barons, the clergy, and the commons, each having had originally opposite interests, and at length agreeing to form a system by which they should mutually check each other.

If negatives in government be useful at all, they should not be given to different classes of men, who have their separate interests, but to persons *differently enlightened*, so that the more intelligent may be a check upon those who have little besides their property to recommend them.

them. If, for instance, a house of assembly be chosen consisting of a thousand persons, it may be useful to have another body, consisting of an hundred, whose reputation for superior wisdom shall recommend them as a check upon the proceedings of the larger body; and from the whole community some one person may be pitched upon as qualified to be a check upon both those houses. But if there is to be one will in one state, these negatives should only operate for a limited time, like that of the king of France, of the king of Poland, and of the president of the States of North America.

In this respect there is more wisdom in the new constitution of Poland than in that of North America. In the former the supreme power resides in the Diet, but in the latter the senate has an absolute negative on all the resolutions of the house of representatives.

Still less wisdom is there in appointing these extraordinary powers to descend to posterity, because superior wisdom does not so descend. Let the individuals be chosen, and let their power be continued as long as shall be thought expedient; but let their descendants have no advantage but from their own personal merit.

If the interest of the whole society as consisting of a number of individuals, all equal with respect to their natural rights, be the true end of government, which is now acknowledged by all writers on the subject, it is obvious that no particular class or body of men within the state should have an absolute negative on the proceedings

ings of all the rest ; because it may happen that the thing which most of all requires reformation may respect that very body itself. It may even be better for the whole that no such body, with such a negative, should exist. To this, however, it could not be expected that that body should give its consent.

In France the clergy made one of the three states of the kingdom, so that whenever they met nothing of consequence could be done without their concurrence. But it is not so with us, and we prefer our own system. Now, should the people in France, from comparing their constitution with ours, have come to think as we do, how could they possibly have adopted that part of our constitution whilst the clergy retained their negative.

It is possible also that the people of any country heretofore governed by kings may come to think that it would be better for them not to be so governed, but that their chief magistrate should officiate for a term of years only, like the president of the United States of America. This, however, would be impossible so long as their king retained his constitutional negative on the proposal. They must either therefore go on in a way which they think disadvantageous to them, or dethrone their prince by violence.

A. But does not our country derive substantial benefit from the balance of three powers in the state, the king, the lords, and the house of commons ?

B. In

B. In countries in which different orders of men are possessed of a negative on all proceedings, it is often more nominal than real. If our house of commons were a true representative of the people, the negative of the house of lords, added to that of the king, would be of no avail in counteracting any proceedings of importance; and this country would be a real republic. According to our forms, the house of commons represents the great mass of the landed and the monied interests of this country, whilst the lords are a set of persons whose *honours* only, and not their *estates*, necessarily descend to their posterity; and the king is a person whose very subsistence depends upon the people, and who, as the history of the country shews, is liable to be set aside for misgovernment.

In this state of things, let us suppose every degree of undue and superstitious reverence to kings and peers to be out of the question, so that no idea of *sacredness* shall be attached to their persons, but that they shall be esteemed only in proportion to the opinion which the people shall have of their virtue, ability, and the use of their office to the public, and that a measure which both the representatives of the people, and the peers also, shall deem to be of the greatest importance to the public welfare is depending. If the king alone were to withhold his assent, the minister who advised him to it would be impeached; and if the king did not change his minister, and his conduct too, he would

would be virtually dethroned, though, according to the constitution, this is impossible. The whole nation would never suffer the opinion of a single man, which they would of course deem to be obstinacy, or insanity, to obstruct their favourite measures. Accordingly, our princes never proceed in this way.

Let us, again, suppose that both the king and the lords refuse to give their assent to any measure which the real representatives of the people should deem to be of the greatest importance to them, and that no remonstrance should avail to gain their concurrence. Would not the commons, seconded by the whole body of the people, do what they actually did in the time of Charles I. i. e. after opposing the king under fictitious pretences, vote both his office, and a house of peers, to be useless? And what power could prevent their resolution from taking effect? In all cases it is the will of the powerful that must rule, and the permission of any negative by that power is nothing more, in fact, than a condescension to hear another opinion, which will be either acceded to, or rejected, at pleasure; and in the nature of things it cannot be otherwise.

A. You were saying that our hereditary nobility had their origin in the feudal system. I wish you would give me a more particular account of it, and of the power they now have as a separate and independent branch of the legislature.

B. In

B. In antient times succession to *power* arose from the same principle with that of succession to an *estate*, and this was very gradual among our ancestors in the free states of Germany. Though their chiefs were originally chosen from among their *peers*, or equals, on a particular emergency only, such as commanding in a war, and when the war was over they ceased to be considered in that light, yet when conquests were made, and it was necessary to keep up the form and discipline of an army in the conquered country, the office of chief became permanent. In this state of things it was also found inconvenient to make the former annual division of lands, and therefore the chief, in whose disposal the land was, allowed every man to retain his possession for life on condition of military service.

After the death of any possessor, if the next heir was capable of cultivating and defending the estate, it was natural to give him the preference; and by this means the idea of *hereditary right* to land arose, and got established. In like manner if the chief magistrate left a son qualified to succeed him, he was suffered so to do, and at length the idea of an hereditary right to *power* came to be as fixed as that of hereditary right to *property*. At length it was allowed even in the case of minors, guardians being appointed to act for them till they came of age, and were capable of acting for themselves. Thus, in a course of time, the idea of an hereditary right to
power

power came to be as fixed in European countries, where it had been unknown for ages, as it is in the East, where it has been from time immemorial; and the idea of the subserviency of this power to the public good was intirely lost.

The fact also was that our kings, from being subject to be controuled by the great barons, or landholders, came to have the sole power of government in their own hands; and the regular meetings of the great council of the nation had not, in reality, any other object than to express the homage of the several members of it, and to *give advice to the crown* when it was asked. In the whole history of the Norman princes till the reign of king John, during which the feudal system was complete, we perceive no traces of any thing but absolute power in the prince. Whatever forms there might be of a government originally free, they had no effect. The King did whatever he pleased. He could not indeed levy any tax, all *subsidies* being voluntary gifts to the crown; but then, by the feudal system, while the crown lands and revenues were entire, he had little occasion for subsidies; the services of his vassals enabling him, in general, even to carry on any war in which he chose to engage.

A. How came the lords to be possessed of the negative which they now have on all public resolutions?

B. When the feudal services became exorbitant, the Barons, who were then the only great land holders, opposed the king, and combining

binning together they became a real check upon him, so that without their concurrence he could not do what he had done before. The clergy also, in connexion with the court of Rome, was another power in the state, the concurrence of which was requisite for any important measure.

A. That the barons, being the great landholders, should be able to controul the king; and that their concurrence should become necessary to all the measures of government, is not to be wondered at. But how came the common people, who were originally the mere vassals of the crown, or of the nobles, to get the power of which they are now possessed?

B. The common people were of no account till by their industry they acquired property, and the nobles by their extravagance became needy. It then became as convenient for the one to sell their lands as for the others to buy them; and the king, wanting the aid of the people against the nobles, favoured this transfer of property, and consequently of power. After this, the people adding to their industry, and the nobles to their extravagance, the greatest part of the landed property of the kingdom came into the hands of the commons; and at this day it would perhaps have been wholly so, if gentlemen of great landed property were not continually made peers. Indeed, a few generations will generally see both the property, and the families, of the rich and luxurious become in a manner extinct. If the present king only had made no peers, those

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who would have remained of the old stock would have been inconsiderable; so that their negative in the affairs of government would not have been of any account.

By this means the mere vassals of the king and of the barons came to be of great consequence, and formed a distinct power in the state; so that the house of commons, consisting of the representatives of borough towns, and of the lesser or impoverished nobility, who found it convenient to rank with them, came to have a negative upon all proceedings, and even the sole power of levying taxes; while the clergy, after the Reformation, lost their consequence, and became a mere accession to the power of the crown.

A. Since the king, lords and commons have each a negative on all public proceedings, whence have arisen the complaints of the great power of the crown, which, in a famous resolution of the house of commons was declared "to have increased, to be increasing, and to require to be diminished."

B. The real foundation of the power of the crown, as also of that of the lords, in this country, is well known to be very different from what a stranger, who should only have read a description of the form of our government, would take it to be. All the real power of the state is in fact in the commons, who represent the greatest mass of property in the country, and the greater part of the power of the king, and of the lords too, arises from the influence they have in the lower house.

house. How this influence is obtained and secured is no secret. Besides the immense power of the crown in the disposal of lucrative places and pensions, a great proportion of the members are in fact nominated by the crown. By this means it is well known that, in ordinary cases, the king's ministers are absolutely sure of their majority in the house of commons, even though they should give no reason whatever for their measures, which however, it is generally thought expedient for them to do. Though, therefore, the king has nominally, and by the constitution, that power of making peace and war, which was derived from the feudal times, the court never ventures upon any measure of so much importance without being well assured beforehand of sufficient support from the commons.

If, in ordinary cases, the power of the king be absolute in the house of commons, it is still more so in that of the lords, most of whom are not only obliged to the crown for the high rank which they hold in the state, but are kept dependant by the provision they wish to make for their children and friends, independently of trade or of a profession; and for this they have no where to look but to the court. Besides, the Scotch peers, and the bishops, being in fact nominated by the court, are sure to favour its views.

A. If this be the case, I see no possible means of obtaining a redress of public grievances.

B. What is here observed respects the ordinary measures of government, from which no

imminent danger to the state is apprehended. In this case there can be no doubt but that a greater consideration would overpower a less. If a foreign invasion, or a national bankruptcy (either of which would put an end to the power of the crown, and of course cut off all expectations from it) was seriously apprehended, the members of the house of commons, and the lords too, being no longer influenced by the crown, would vote according to their real opinion, because their own interest and that of the country at large would then be the same. But while any set of men can expect to derive benefit to themselves at the expence of the whole community, it must be supposed that, in general, they will not scruple to do it. Their very judgments may be so far blinded by their interests, as to imagine that the good of the whole is best promoted by this corruption and abuse.

A. If a majority of the house of commons be thus in the interest of the court, where are we to look for a check upon it?

B. A great check upon the measures of the court, and on the servility of the house of commons, is the declared *sense of the people* at large; and were they truly enlightened, and showed a proper spirit, their opinion only concerning public measures, though they are no nominal part of the legislature, would be decisive. Because the real power of the state is in their hands. Their greatest difficulty in the exercise of this power arises from their want of union.

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But even this might be remedied by committees of correspondence, and other means, so as sufficiently to overawe the governing powers. And though so many even of the common people are directly or indirectly influenced by the court, that very little is to be expected from this quarter in the present state of things, it is highly proper that their minds should be enlightened, and that they should have a full sense of their natural rights, in order that they may be prepared to act with intelligence and effect in any new state of things that may occur.

A. Does it not become all true patriots not only to endeavour to enlighten the minds of their countrymen, in order that they may be ready to take advantage of new situations, but also to endeavour to bring things into those situations, so favourable to their exertions?

B. No wise man will ever wish for any great or sudden change in any existing form of government, especially if it have been of long continuance, and the people in general be tolerably easy and happy under it, because such changes are very hazardous, unless the minds of the people be fully prepared for them by much previous discussion and reasoning on the subject. But when the minds of the generality of the people are well informed concerning the nature of government, and the true source of all abuses, their only expressing their sense of them may be the means of procuring a redress of their complaints without any violence whatever; or if

a crisis should arise in which great changes must necessarily be made, they will be prepared to make a wise and effectual reform in their government. But without this no useful change can be made.

If in any country the minds of men were prepossessed, as they generally are in the East, with the idea of the sacredness of kingly or priestly power, so that they should not think themselves at liberty to diminish it, though any one king should be dethroned, or put to death, for his abuse of power, they would have no other idea of relieving themselves than by putting another, of whom they had better hopes, in his place. In such countries all revolutions terminate without any change in the form of government, which consequently remain as liable to abuse as ever. The reason is, that the minds of the people were not enlightened with respect to the nature and object of government. They considered some persons as born to command, and others to obey, and had no idea of the naturally equal rights of every member in the community, and that the only end of government, or public order, is the happiness of the whole.

In like manner, if the minds of men were prepossessed with the idea of the necessity of some *religious establishment*, the abuses of one would only lead to the substitution of another; and spiritual tyranny, whatever the country might suffer by it, would be transmitted from one generation to another.

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In reality, it is *opinion* that governs the world, and till the general opinion in any country concerning the foundation, the nature, and the uses of government be changed, all useful revolutions will be impossible, or not permanent. While the Turks, for example, retain the idea of a right in the house Othman to govern them, they will never bear a prince of any other family, or any other form of government than that of an absolute monarchy, limited, however, as their government is, and in fact all arbitrary governments are. They would consider any other prince, how successful soever against the reigning family, as nothing more than an usurper, and every other form of government as unlawful for *them*; and though they might yield to necessity, and think proper to conceal their sentiments for a time; yet if they were not fundamentally changed, they would only gain strength by suppression. They would be the more thought of, and cherished, on this very account; and on some occasion or other, which would be sure to occur, they would operate with redoubled violence in favour of the antient family, and the antient form of government.

This appears in the history of England. While the idea of hereditary right in any family to the crown was not forgotten, an injury done to the supposed *lawful heir*, by his temporary exclusion from the throne, almost ensured his future succession. There never appeared so enthusiastic an attachment to the family of Stuart

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as at the restoration of Charles II. and the bulk of the nation were Jacobites till long after the accession of the house of Hanover; so that it required great prudence, as well as great vigour, in the reigning family to exclude the Pretender. Were there a reputable heir to that family, even now, and he should become a protestant, it would, no doubt, give serious alarm to the family on the throne.

If the minds of the great body of the French nation did not appear to be thoroughly enlightened on the subject of government; had not their former enthusiastic attachment to their monarchs, and the rights of the monarchy, received a fatal blow by the late writings in favour of liberty, by the shocking abuses of their government, by the embarrassments that by this means they were brought into, and by the example of America, there could be no dependence at all on their late revolution. The king might sleep, or do what he pleased, his *rights*, as they might be called, would not long lie dormant, and there would soon be a *counter-revolution*, when the chains of slavery would be rivetted faster than ever. But while the people in general approve of the present government, all attempts to overturn it will be in vain.

A. I perceive that you are far from being discouraged by the present aspect of things.

B. No maxim may be more depended upon than that, whatever is *true* and *right* will finally prevail, and the more violent is the opposition that

that is made to them, the more firmly will they be established in the end; because opposition excites *attention*, and this is all that is necessary to the perception of any truth in minds free from prejudice; and in time one prejudice will so balance another, that true candour will prevail in the world.

A. I think I can perceive your opinion of the great excellence of the English constitution is somewhat changed since our last conversation; when you dropped no hint of there being any thing amiss in its general principles.

B. I am not ashamed to acknowledge that this has been the case. There is no good reason why any man should be blind to the defects of his parent state, any more than to those of his natural parents. Nothing human, we all allow, is absolutely perfect; but what is imperfect may be borne with; which I think to be the case with the constitution of England. I have not, I own, that high veneration which I once had for it: since I have seen others which appear to me to be better. But I think that all the solid advantages of society may be had in ours, with such *reforms* as it is very capable of. And it will certainly be wisdom in our governors to listen to proposals of reform, rather than run the risk of such convulsions as may be the consequence of an obstinate refusal to reform any thing.

Still, however, I have no objection to a form of government in which the supreme power may
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be said to be lodged in *three states*, and those states may with propriety enough be termed *king, lords, and commons*; the king being the person who has the *executive power* of the state, the lords being a *select senate*, and the commons a true *representative of the people* at large. But the power and emoluments of the king may be greatly reduced; nor is it necessary that either his office, or that of the lords, should be hereditary, or even for life, and neither the lords nor the king should have an absolute negative on the resolutions of the house of commons.

If it be said that such a government as this would be more properly called a *republic*, than a *monarchy*, I have no objection. The definitions of those terms are in a great measure arbitrary, and it is not *names* but *things*, that we are to attend to.

I am far, however, from wishing that any attempts should be made to reduce the government of England into such a form as this, which I might recommend to a country that had no government at all. Things once established should be respected by speculative politicians, because they will be respected by the people at large; but every thing should be put into the way of as much reformation as it is capable of.

If the house of commons could be made, what it once really was, but is now very far from being, a real *representative of the people*, every other reform would be made without any difficulty whatever; because they would be such as
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the great body of the people would really wish for, and therefore such as would have their most hearty concurrence. And then what power could resist their force?

There is no danger of a whole people making too many, or too rapid changes. The greater part are always sufficiently averse to *innovations*, and it is happy that they are so; because in consequence of this every public measure is sure to meet with the most ample discussion, and to be thoroughly well considered; and not only the more intelligent, but also the least so, must be convinced before any thing that is new can be fully established. Changes made with such deliberation, and after so much discussion, are pretty sure to be permanent. For, in the time that is necessary to bring them about, every possible objection will have been urged, and every inconvenience that can be foreseen will be obviated.

When reforms are made with this deliberate circumspection, no individuals need to suffer from them. If it be possible, let all retrenchments of profit or honour affect *posterity* only, who will never have enjoyed them; and let the emoluments of abuse die away gradually with those who are at present possessed of them. A reformation on this plan cannot be said to be violent, or to have any thing in it that can justly alarm any man.

A. I think myself much obliged to you for this free communication of your sentiments on these

these important subjects, and shall take the liberty to apply to you again on any similar occasion.

B. I shall think myself happy if, by means of such free conversation, any new light should be struck out by either of us. These subjects have much difficulty attending them; and much reflection, as well as an extensive acquaintance with history and existing facts are necessary to get a proper insight into them. I am myself but a learner; but whatever light I get myself, I shall be happy to communicate it others.

N. B. These Dialogues will perhaps be continued, and by different hands.



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